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ABSTRACT

This paper describes approaches that states have taken to systemic reform in adult education programs, approaches driven by the demand for accountability and high-quality services from legislation and other sources. It begins by defining systemic change and presenting a framework for understanding it. The document presents approaches in four areas that state policymakers can use in implementing systemic reform: (1) stimulating the use of innovative management, assessment, and instructional practices; (2) developing policy to support change strategies; (3) facilitating organizational and professional learning; and (4) coordinating and collaborating within and across states to leverage support for adult education. The paper provides descriptions of state program improvement activities and discusses the conditions that influence adoption of change strategies. The importance of standards for learner performance, assessment instruments, data collection and use, and funding for performance is highlighted. (SK)

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Promoting Systemic Change through Adult Education

Info

by
Judith A.
Alamprese

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Promoting Systemic Change in Adult Education

Information Series No. 377

by

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Foreword

The Educational Resources Information Center Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education (ERIC/ACVE) is 1 of 16 clearinghouses in a national information system that is funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education. This paper was developed to fulfill one of the functions of the clearinghouse—interpreting the literature in the ERIC database. It was co-sponsored by the **National Adult Education Professional Development Consortium**. This paper should be of interest to adult educators, administrators, and policymakers, and graduate students in adult education.

ERIC/ACVE would like to thank Judith Alamprese for her work in preparing this paper. Ms. Alamprese is Principal Associate at Abt Associates, Bethesda, MD, where she is currently directing a 5-year national evaluation of effective adult basic education programs and practices. She has over 20 years of experience directing research and evaluation projects in adult literacy and basic education, program effectiveness, interagency coordination, and state assessment systems. She served as a member of the national advisory committee for the Section 353 Adult Education Program Evaluation and is the author of numerous publications on assessment and evaluation of adult education programs, including ***Assessing the Effects of Volunteer Literacy Programs*** (Laubach Literacy Action), ***Linking Research and Evaluation to Policy and Practice in Adult Education***, and ***Literacy on the Cafeteria Line: Evaluation of the Skills Enhancement Training Program***.

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Executive Summary

This paper describes approaches that states have taken to systemic reform in adult education programs, approaches driven by the demand for accountability and high-quality services from legislation and other sources. Four areas are explored:

- The use of innovative management, assessment, and instructional practices
- Development of policy that supports change
- Professional and organizational learning
- Coordination within and across states to leverage support for adult education

The paper provides descriptions of state program improvement activities and discusses the conditions that influence adoption of change strategies. The importance of standards for learner performance, assessment instruments, data collection and use, and funding for performance is highlighted.

Information on systemic change in adult education may be found in the ERIC database using the following descriptors: *Accountability, Adoption (Ideas), *Adult Education, Change Agents, Coordination, Educational Innovation, Policy Formation, *Program Improvement, *State Agencies, State Programs, and the identifier *Systemic Change. Asterisks indicate terms that are particularly relevant.

Introduction

During the 1990s, the field of adult basic and literacy education has faced the challenge of improving the quality of the services it provides to adult learners and the data about the results of these services. First noted in the Adult Education Act Amendments of 1988 and in the National Literacy Act of 1991, and now emphasized in the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act of 1998, this call for accountability has focused the attention of policymakers at the federal, state, and local levels. The new legislation requires that states implement a system of program accountability, fund programs based, in part, on the quality of their services, and collaborate with other agencies in reporting data on participant outcomes related to employment and further education and training. Central to carrying out these requirements is the states' capacity to work with local adult education programs in providing training on data collection and use, in motivating programs to consider the adoption and development of new practices, and in promoting the role of adult basic education in the work force development and human services delivery system.

Although many agencies in a state may have funds that can be used to support adult education activities, the key entity responsible for leading a state's efforts in adult education is the agency that oversees the administration of funding from the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act. In the majority of states, this entity is the state's education agency. In 15 of the states, Pacific Islands, and territories, the community college system or a state agency other than K-12 education administers the federal adult education monies. A state's adult education office is responsible for distributing Adult Education and Family Literacy Act and state adult education funds, overseeing and monitoring local programs supported with these funds, and facilitating technical assistance and training. The adult education state office, and in particular, the state director of adult education, is often the primary spokesperson for adult education in state government and plays a key leadership role in setting policy and promoting continuous program improvement.

In response to the call for program accountability, data reporting, and high-quality services, state adult education offices have been engaged in various activities to develop performance standards, conduct program improvement initiatives, and align the delivery of staff development with program needs. Some have undertaken

statewide initiatives to promote change throughout a state's adult education system, whereas others have carried out limited experiments in trying new ideas and processes. Both represent strategies that states can use to meet federal and state adult education funding requirements and to heighten the quality of services that are available to eligible youth and adults (hereafter referred to as "adults"). As states have engaged in systemic change activities, they have both designed their own initiatives and used external consultants to assist them in program development. Increasingly, state staff have used information from the research, evaluation, and technical assistance adult education projects that are being funded by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Institute for Literacy to carry out these activities.

As state directors of adult education and their staffs have met nationally and regionally to discuss federal and state requirements, it has become evident that, although state adult education offices may be located in different organizational entities and have different local delivery systems, there are core issues that all states must address in developing continuous program improvement and accountability systems. These discussions among state and federal adult education officials have brought attention to the need for better dissemination and access to information, particularly with regard to the strategies that states are using to meet legislative requirements. As one step in the transfer of information to facilitate states' program development efforts, this document presents approaches in four areas that state policymakers can use in implementing systemic reform:

Approaches in four areas that state policymakers can use in implementing systemic reform:

- Stimulating the use of new management, assessment, and instructional practices
- Developing policy to support change strategies
- Facilitating professional development
- Coordinating and collaborating with agencies to leverage support for adult education services

- Stimulating the use of new management, assessment, and instructional practices;
- Developing policy to support change strategies;
- Facilitating professional development; and
- Coordinating and collaborating with agencies to leverage support for adult education services.

The information presented in this document is drawn from the author's work in documenting state program improvement initiatives in California, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania as well as from work with other states and data sources. Although not comprehensive, the examples provided in this document are illustrative practices that state policymakers in adult education can undertake in refining their adult education systems.

Approaches to Systemic Change in Adult Education

Defining Systemic Change

In considering systemic change in the field of adult education, one needs to define what is meant by a "system" and what is meant by "change." A system consists of organizations and the individuals who participate in these entities. In adult education, a system operates at both the state and local levels and includes the following four components:

- The state agency and staff who administer the federal and state adult education monies;
- The local adult education program and staff who deliver services to adult learners;
- The communities in which these services are located and the adult learners from these communities who participate in adult education services; and
- The nonadult education state and local agencies and staff who provide support and other related services to adult learners.

Although each component is discrete, the interaction and connectivity among the components constitutes a system. Any approach to systemic change must involve the organizations and individuals in each of these components. Inherent in this typology are the following assumptions: state and local adult education staff think that there is a need for change, they value working together to provide high-quality services to adults, and they see state policy and funding as key levers for effecting change. There is a further assumption that nonadult education agencies and staff have critical roles to play in supporting the adult education services that learners receive and in linking these learners to further education and training. The expected result from these efforts is a high-quality system of adult education services that enables adult learners to achieve their educational goals and improve the quality of their lives in their roles as family members, workers, and citizens.

Change must occur across components in order for it to be considered systemic. In states undertaking systemic change initiatives in adult education, state staff have used policy development, staff training, and technical assistance as levers for promoting change activities. The assumption has been that state and local programs must work together in trying new processes and activities, such as assessment, evaluation, new curricular content, and program regionalization, in order for the system to work more effectively in serving adult learners.

"State and local programs must work together in trying new processes and activities, such as assessment, evaluation, new curricular content, and program regionalization, in order for the system to work more effectively in serving adult learners."

Framework for Understanding Change

Recent work on systemic reform in elementary and secondary education, particularly in mathematics and science education, provides a context for examining current efforts at systems change in adult education. Many of the elementary and secondary education initiatives have drawn on the research on change conducted over the past 30 years in order to understand the conditions under which organizations and individuals are likely to engage in new practices (e.g., Crandall and Associates 1982; Gross, Giacquinta, and Bernstein 1971; Hall and Loucks 1978; Rogers 1962). In a review of systemic reforms and the mathematics and science classroom, Knapp (1997) provides a lens through which to understand three key elements of reform:

- The role of innovation in effecting change
- The role of policy implementation
- The role of professional and organizational learning

Each of these elements is based on a set of assumptions and conditions under which change may be possible. The elements are interrelated and may be considered to be critical components of an initiative to promote systemic change. In particular, they provide a context for examining the strategies and incentives that state adult education staff are using in encouraging local adult education program staff to develop new approaches to organizing services and meeting the educational needs of adult learners.

The Role of Innovation

An approach to improving programs in the field of education that began in the early 1970s was to train teachers to adopt innovative curricula, instructional strategies, or assessment practices that had been shown to be effective in facilitating student learning or attainment of goals. The assumption underlying this approach was that training instructors to use new, effective practices would lead to a higher quality of service that, in turn, would increase the academic performance of learners. One way in which this approach was implemented was with funding provided by the U.S. Department of Education's (formerly the U.S. Office of Education) National Diffusion Network (NDN). Through the NDN grants, program developers in local school districts, nonprofit organizations, and other educational entities disseminated their practices nationally by training teachers and other school personnel and providing technical assistance in the use of these practices. The intent was to reduce the time instructors spent attempting to solve similar problems by leveraging the use of innovative practices that had been developed with federal program and discretionary funds and that had evidence of effectiveness through a national dissemination system. Although the majority of NDN-funded programs were in elementary and secondary education, five adult education programs were nationally disseminated through the NDN (Moore 1996). The NDN operated for over 20 years and was the most comprehensive federally supported dissemination system in education. In a more limited way, innovative practices have also been promoted through state dissemination systems and with funding from foundations.

The use of formal dissemination systems may be one way to transfer innovative practices. Another option is for states to encourage administrators and staff to try new practices as a way of improving their programs. This can be done through state initiatives that motivate programs to try new approaches to program services, through mandates that require local programs to use specific processes or that encourage change in local programs informally. Regardless of the way in which individuals learn about new practices or are encouraged to use them, it appears that considering program alternatives is one component of systemic change.

This strategy of using innovative practices to effect change in educational organizations is based on a number of assumptions:

- Practitioners and policymakers believe that programs need to be improved and that the adoption of effective practices is one way to address this need.

- There is a practice, product, process, or organizational arrangement that has been shown to be effective and that can be diffused, disseminated, or adopted.

- There are fiscal resources to support the dissemination and adoption processes.

- Change agents are critical to the dissemination and adoption processes.

Stimulants for Change

In the field of adult education, the impetus for program improvement has come from many sources. Sometimes state leaders determine that a new initiative is needed to focus the attention of local programs on issues such as serving new target populations, providing better services, or raising awareness about the importance of adult education and literacy within and outside of education. Often a state or federal directive may prompt a state adult education office to implement a statewide program improvement initiative. Changes in program services can come from local program staff who identify a need for new services and suggest ways of addressing this need. Program staff also may participate in action research or practitioner inquiry activities to collect data about their practices and examine them in light of recent research.

State-Driven Initiatives. California's competency-based adult education (CBAE) initiative that began in 1982 was an example of a state-initiated mandate whereby the state's federally funded adult education agencies were required to use a competency-based approach in organizing and delivering services to learners. The state adult education staff viewed the mandate as a mechanism for facilitating program coordination and for increasing the quality of adult basic education services being offered to adults. Although agencies were expected to organize their programs to include key components of a competency-based system, such as specification of competencies, procedures for placement, coordinated instruction and assessment, use of appropriate materials, and processes for reporting student performance, they had flexibility in specifying competencies and program content. The expected result from the CBAE mandate was better procedures for program

accountability as well as a common reference for communicating and sharing information that would result in the overall improvement of adult basic education in California (Alamprese et al. 1987).

The Connecticut Department of Education's Bureau of Adult Education's (now the Bureau of Adult Education and Training) 5-year initiative—the Connecticut Adult Performance Program (CAPP)—is an example of a state initiative promoted by a state directive. The bureau began CAPP in response to a recommendation made by the state's Adult Education Study Committee and endorsed by the State Board of Education in 1985, which stated that all basic skills programs adopt a competency-based approach to delivering services by 1990 as a condition for funding from the Connecticut Department of Education. CAPP was expected to meet three needs regarding adult education services in the state:

1. To have a comprehensive adult basic skills system that integrates academic skills with functional life skills

2. To establish a program management system that provides information that can be used to assess program accountability and to make funding decisions

3. To increase the performance of adult learners participating in state-funded basic skills programs

The developers of the CAPP initiative assumed that staff development and technical assistance activities would be effective mechanisms for disseminating new policies and programmatic interventions to adult education administrative, instructional, and counseling staff. It was also expected that these policies and programmatic interventions would result in more relevant adult education instruction and accountable adult education programs (Alamprese 1993).

Although the California and Connecticut statewide improvement initiatives predated the accountability requirements in the Adult Education Act, they both accurately predicted the need for more accountability and better services in adult basic education. These initiatives were also systemic in that they dealt with all levels of the adult education system, and they included policy, development, training, and technical assistance.

A more recent state effort to foster systems change is Pennsylvania's multiyear program improvement initiative, Project Educational

Quality in Adult Literacy (EQuAL), which was begun in 1994 partly in response to the federal call for accountability and also due to the state adult education office's desire to foster an improved system for adult education in the state. The Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education began EQuAL as a process for collecting and analyzing learner and program data that the bureau could use in monitoring the performance of state-funded adult education services, determining performance standards for local adult education programs, and identifying ongoing staff and program development needs.

The state's process for monitoring adult basic education and literacy programs also was revised. Over time, EQuAL has become the focus of program improvement efforts in the state that has involved the alignment of staff development, technical assistance, and state policies supporting these activities (Alamprese, Voight, and Stickney 1998).

Local Change Efforts. In addition to state-driven improvement efforts, local program staff have undertaken change activities by initiating action research (e.g., California's OAR project) and practitioner inquiry activities (Lytle 1996). Local adult education staff work together to pose questions about the practice of adult basic education and literacy or to examine various aspects of their programs. They collect information and examine this information in light of research findings or practices of others. The staff meet to discuss their research findings and their implications for undertaking new practices. This approach to change is locally driven and is not necessarily undertaken in direct response to a state initiative.

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The Use of Innovative Practices

Regardless of the impetus for change, state and local program staff desiring to improve their systems or programs need to access existing effective practices or develop new ones as part of the change process. In the field of adult education, the Special Experimental Demonstration projects supported under Section 353 (formerly 309 and 310) of the Adult Education Act (as amended by the National Literacy Act of 1991) have been the main sources of promising practices. With these funds, special project staff have developed materials for curriculum and instruction, designed approaches for delivering services, conducted research and evaluation, developed assessment systems, and disseminated information. Since the 1970s, several thousand projects have been supported with these monies, ranging from large, multiyear projects directed at systems

change such as the External High School Diploma Program (EDP), the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System, and the ESL Institute, to smaller, 1-year efforts in materials development and dissemination, among others. Four of the five adult education projects funded under the National Diffusion Network were developed with these monies: Adult Performance Level (APL) Program, BES Adult Literacy Project, Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System, and the EDP.

Although numerous projects have been supported with the Special Experimental Demonstration funds, the national evaluation of the Section 353 Set-Aside for Teacher Training and Innovation in Adult Education found that a limited number had been evaluated and disseminated (Mackin et al. 1996). Examined in this study was a sample of 116 projects (from a universe of 1376) carried out during the period Fiscal Year 1991-Fiscal Year 1994. The evaluation addressed a number of issues concerning the extent to which the projects could be viewed as effective and useful in improving practice. For example, few of the projects had a required evaluation component or data describing their effectiveness. Most often, it was not clear whether the project had been developed based on prior research or existing knowledge. Although there was an intent to disseminate the projects, there was no system for transfer that included personnel and resources to facilitate the adoption or adaptation of these practices.

The evaluation offered a number of recommendations for state adult education officials that are important to consider in examining the role of innovation and effective practice as part of the systemic change process in adult education. These suggestions are particularly important in light of the State Leadership monies that replace Section 353 funds in the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act of 1998. To ensure the likelihood that special projects developed with State Leadership funds can be of high quality and useful in effecting change, the following should be considered:

- Include sufficient time and resources in funding a project to determine the types of research and prior experience that can be used in formulating or conceptualizing the project.

- Require that projects use the stages of development-demonstration-revision in their design to ensure that a high-quality product is created.

- Require that projects include plans for evaluation and dissemination from the outset.

- Fund projects that interrelate or complement each other so that they can be used in building the components of a systemic change process.

Pennsylvania's activities in funding Section 353 special projects to support Project EQuAL are one illustration of the use of these recommendations. Central to the Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education's development of a performance management system has been a reliable and valid assessment system. One of EQuAL's first activities was to review the quality of the learner assessment data being collected by local programs. Based on the results of this review, the bureau determined that program staff needed both information and training regarding the types and uses of assessment, and thus supported a Section 353 project to produce an assessment manual and related training. Another element of the management system was having a set of competencies to guide the development of program content. To address this need, the bureau funded a project to review prior research and development in the specification of life-skill competencies for adult education and then to adapt a life-skill competency framework with the underlying basic skills that Pennsylvania's local adult education programs could use. To support these activities, the bureau included training related to assessment and competency use as part of the state's regional staff development system. In this way, multiple Section 353 projects were funded as part of an integrated approach to creating and implementing a performance management system for adult basic education and literacy services.

Conditions Supporting Adoption of Practices

Funding program staff to develop new practices is one method of facilitating program change. Encouraging them to adopt or adapt effective practices designed by other adult educators is another strategy. As previously noted, the United States currently does not have a national dissemination mechanism to facilitate the adoption process. However, adult educators do disseminate their practices through staff development events, conference presentations, the use of online systems and education clearinghouses, and the paper transfer of information. These dissemination activities are an initial step in promoting the adoption or adaptation of new practices and can be effective in discouraging adult educators from developing redundant materials, curricula, other tools that they use in working with adult learners.

Inherently appealing in reducing development time and resources, the adoption of new practices can still be a complicated process.

The findings from Knapp's (1997) review of the role of innovation in systems change is helpful for understanding the conditions under which the adoption of a new practice is likely to be successful. Four conditions appear to be important:

- Cost is reasonable.
- Innovation is not too complex.
- New practice is congruent with prior practices and users' knowledge.
- Change agents understand the state of the existing program and its readiness for change.

Cost and Complexity. The cost of the new practice is a critical element, and its reasonableness is a relative term that will vary according to the resources available in a local adult education program. Related to cost is the complexity of the innovation or practice. For example, a multifaceted assessment process, such as the External High School Diploma Program, is more complex to adopt than curriculum materials used in teaching writing for the General Educational Development (GED) Test. The history of the dissemination of the External High School Diploma Program through the National Diffusion Network and subsequently through the American Council on Education is a case example of an innovation in adult education that has been both expensive and complex, and thus has been limited in its adoption. As originally designed, the EDP required multiple staff to be trained over 3-5 days, which was modified over time. The implementation of the program also called for staff to conduct one-on-one assessment with adult learners, which is more costly than carrying out assessment in a group setting (Alamprese and Feldman 1980). One result of these program elements has been the reluctance of state and local adult education programs to invest in this alternative secondary credentialing program, even though it is an appropriate option for adults with life experience from working or managing a family.

A contrasting example has been the dissemination of the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System. Although a different type of assessment process from the EDP, CASAS also was disseminated through the National Diffusion Network and continues to be available nationally. Some factors that facilitated the adoption of CASAS include a shorter training requirement, a less-costly implementation, and options for using different products developed by the system (***Educational Programs that Work*** 1995).

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Having sufficient resources available for staff to receive training and use a new practice is critical.

The experiences of the dissemination of these two adult education programs indicate that having sufficient resources available for staff to receive training and use a new practice is critical. The more complex a practice (i.e., a practice with multiple components, highly technical information), the more time and fiscal resources will be needed for its successful adoption.

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Congruence of Practice. In addition to cost and complexity of a new practice, the condition of the congruence of the new practice with prior practices and the knowledge of the intended user influence adoption. For example, both the EDP and CASAS are competency-based processes. In the initial dissemination of these programs, the early adopters were more likely to be states and programs that were using a competency-based framework that allowed the integration of these programs philosophically into current practice. This philosophical congruence made it more likely that staff would accept a new practice and use it.

Role of Change Agent. A fourth element is the role of a change agent and this individual's understanding of the extent to which a program is ready for change. The change agent can be a key person in a program's staff such as the program coordinator or resource teacher, who works with the staff in facilitating the adoption and use of the new practice. A key role of the change agent is to assess the extent to which the practice being considered for adoption is similar philosophically to the staff's existing beliefs and behaviors. If a philosophical change on the part of the staff is an element of the improvement process, staff may need additional time, training, and materials to accept the new perspective and incorporate it into their practice. The replication of a practice usually requires that staff use the practice in the way it was intended to obtain the same results. If staff do not have the same success using a new practice, then it may be helpful to review the assumptions the staff made about the use of the practice or the way in which it is being implemented. If the programmatic or client conditions of the adopter are different from those of the developer of the practice, then the practice may not be a good fit with the program attempting to use it.

All of these factors are important in fostering change through the use of new practices developed by others. Where possible, state policymakers and local program staff should seek evidence that the practice has worked under similar conditions and understand the types of outcomes that are reasonable to expect from the use of the practice. One strategy that state policymakers have used is to implement a new initiative in stages that involve supporting pilot

programs who try out new practices under different sets of conditions. By selecting pilot programs that reflect the variety of service providers and clients, state policymakers and local staff can determine the conditions under which a new practice is likely to produce the expected outcomes. This information will help to guide program staff in integrating new practices into existing operations.

The Role of Policy

Any systemic change initiative must have policies that guide the reform activities. The assumption is that a policy, a publicly announced set of intentions, combined with an allocation of resources and other provisions, will motivate and sustain change-oriented activities throughout a system (Knapp 1997). Since the passage of the 1988 Adult Education Act Amendments and the National Literacy Act of 1991, state offices of adult education have been concerned with policy development in the area of program accountability, particularly concerning program quality and evaluation. Much of this work has centered on the specification and implementation of indicators of program quality. A review of the 1992 state adult education plans conducted by Elliott and Hayward (1994) indicated that all states had adopted the required indicators of recruitment, retention, and learner progress. All but four states at this time had specified some measure of learner advancement (e.g., advancement to a higher program skill level, attainment of a GED or competency certificate, and entry into other programs).

With the passage of the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act of 1998, states now have to set policy for adult education programs regarding performance levels in three areas. The core indicators of performance for these three areas are—

- Demonstrated improvements in literacy skill levels in reading, writing, and speaking the English language; numeracy and problem solving; English-language acquisition; and other literacy skills
- Placement in, retention, or completion of postsecondary education, training, unsubsidized employment, or career advancement
- Receipt of a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent

In addition, states need to describe how their adult education and family literacy activities will be integrated with other adult education, career development, and employment and training activities in the state or outlying area served by the agency eligible to receive funds.

Because of the requirements of the 1998 legislation, states are developing policy directives for guiding local adult education programs in conducting learner assessment and other data collection and reporting results to the state agency. The topic of assessment is a key policy area for adult education and a linchpin to the systemic change activities underway in the states. State adult education offices also have specified policies in related areas, such as professional development, to encourage local programs to carry out continuous program improvement activities.

Policy and Program Accountability

Challenges to Accountability

The impediments to state adult education efforts to enhance program accountability and program evaluation have been well noted. Recent studies (Kutner, Webb, and Matheson 1996; Moore and Stavrianos 1995; Young et al. 1994) have suggested a number of factors that have inhibited local programs' capacity to implement accountability processes:

- The different types of curricula used by local adult education programs have made it difficult to align assessment and instruction.
- The administration of standardized pre- and posttests has not been a priority in adult education programs and has affected the frequency and quality of assessment data collected.
- Assessment instruments often are selected for ease of administration rather than because they reflect the content of what is being taught.

Another factor has been the difficulty in gathering and interpreting data accurately at the state and local levels. For example, programs that have open-entry and open-exit policies whereby learners can enter or complete a program at any time often have

short-term attendance that makes it difficult for program administrators to track how many adults have been served or the types of services that they have received from a program. According to estimates made by the National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs (Young et al. 1994), errors in local administration of standardized tests invalidated as much as one-third of the performance data collected as part of the study.

Attempts to address these challenges have come from the federal and state levels. Since 1991, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education has supported state efforts to improve accountability through the development of an evaluation framework, the specification of quality indicators for adult education, and the funding of technical assistance for state accountability and assessment (Condelli and Kutner 1997; Condelli, Koloski, and Webb 1992; Kutner, Webb, and Herman 1993). The National Institute for Literacy's project to develop accountability systems and its ongoing Equipped for the Future initiative to specify content standards for adult basic education with related assessment are two other supports for the accountability movement in adult education (National Institute for Literacy 1995; Stein 1995).

Some states have exhibited leadership in designing more accountable adult education programs. These activities have included developing consensus about what should be taught, designing a core adult education curriculum that often emphasizes employment-related basic skills, and identifying assessment instruments to measure what has been learned by participants.

A 1996 review of 11 state efforts to develop a statewide system of learner competencies, curriculum, and assessment indicated that seven states had specified statewide competency systems, with four of the seven states drawing their competencies from CASAS. Some of the states had produced statewide curriculum guides with recommended resources, whereas others had suggested curriculum that local programs might consider. A few of the states also developed statewide procedures for recognizing learners' accomplishments through certification programs (Kutner, Webb, and Matheson 1996).

Key Issues in State Accountability

As states move ahead to address the accountability requirements in adult education in the context of program improvement, the

development of state policy plays a key role in these activities. Four areas in which policy is an important lever are the following:

1. Setting standards for learner performance
2. Using assessment instruments
3. Promoting the collection and use of high-quality data
4. Funding programs based on performance

Setting Standards. States face a challenge in attempting to set standards for learner performance and having sufficient data to specify the level of gain learners are expected to achieve. One type of standard is a *relative* standard, in which the expected level of performance is set based on the actual average performance of learners in a state's system. In order to set a relative standard, a state must have reasonable data about the performance of adult learners in various levels of a program (e.g., beginning, intermediate, advanced). The average gain of learners over a specified period of time (the number of hours of instruction a learner receives) is computed for each level of learners. These performance levels can be validated as the quality of learner assessment data increases over time.

Both Connecticut and Pennsylvania used this methodology in setting their performance standards for adult education. In Connecticut, the state's data on adult basic education learners participating in the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Program (JOBS) were used to set the standards for determining the satisfactory progress of these clients in education programs. The analysis was expanded to include all adult basic education participants and standards then were set for the state's adult basic education system (Alamprese 1998). In Pennsylvania, the external consultant to Project EQuAL collected and analyzed assessment data from the project's 20 pilot sites and developed draft performance standards that were then validated based on the analysis of data from a larger number of programs.

Another type of standard is an *absolute* standard, which is based on the level of performance that it takes a learner to achieve a certain outcome (e.g., obtain a job, advance in a job, obtain a high school diploma). This type of standard is directly related to the expected outcomes from program participation and, as such, would be a more accurate standard. However, since little national or state

data exist for adult education that can relate the amount of gain a learner achieves to specific outcomes, this type of standard is rarely used.

Using Assessment Instruments. As part of the standards-setting process, states are having to specify a policy on the types of learner assessment instruments that local programs use to measure learner progress. Some states (e.g., Connecticut, Oregon) require that local programs use specific instruments in assessing adult basic education and English-as-a-second-language learners. Other states (e.g., Pennsylvania) give programs flexibility in choosing from a list of instruments. What is important in determining this policy is the appropriateness of the instrument for the types of learners and programs and the ways in which data will be analyzed and used.

Discussions at the National Forum on Adult Education and Literacy: Views from Teachers sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education in September 1998 reinforced the need for the dissemination of information to local program staff about the types and uses of learner assessment instruments. For example, assessment data can be used to—

- Place learners in a specific level of instruction;
- Measure a learner's progress on an ongoing basis relative to his/her own performance; and
- Measure a learner's progress from one time period to another compared to other learners.

The type of instrument one chooses (e.g., standardized, nonstandardized; general literacy measure; specific skill assessment) should depend on the intended uses of the assessment. For example, a diagnostic or placement instrument (e.g., CASAS Placement Test, TABE [Test of Adult Basic Education] Locator) is used to place learners in an appropriate level of instruction or to guide instruction for learners in a multilevel class. This type of instrument contains fewer items and is administered in a shorter amount of time than is an instrument used to measure learners' progress. Because a placement or diagnostic instrument may not assess a wide range of skills, it should not be used for measuring progress; rather, a survey achievement test is the appropriate instrument to determine learner gain.

A related issue concerns the use of measures of generalized literacy skills—e.g., TABE, ABLE, CASAS, TALS [Test of Applied

Literacy Skills]—with beginning learners who have reading difficulties. The generalized measures do not necessarily identify the specific reading skills that learners will need to develop, and specific reading instruments may be needed to supplement the measures of generalized literacy skills.

There has been increasing interest in the adult education field in alternative or applied assessment that enables learners to present a variety of evidence of skill demonstration. Many instructors currently use alternative assessment to monitor learners' progress in achieving the goals that they have set. Although alternative assessment is appropriate for documenting individual learners' accomplishments, it cannot be used for comparing learners' progress unless the assessment is standardized. In this circumstance, the same items are evaluated under the same conditions with all learners. What is critical in the assessment discussion is that all program staff understand the variety of assessment instruments that are available and their appropriate use.

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The determination of the types of assessment instruments that states will use in meeting their accountability requirements is a critical policy decision. The challenge is for state policymakers to collect learner data that can be aggregated across programs while considerating the strengths and weaknesses of the available instruments, the variety of learners being served by programs, and the state's capacity to provide ongoing training and technical assistance to assure the reliable and valid collection of assessment data.

Promoting the Quality and Use of Data. The quality of standards a state can set is dependent on the available data. As the experience of states has indicated (e.g., the training and technical assistance provided in Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and Oregon), local programs need extensive training and follow-up in the types of appropriate assessment, the administration of instruments, and the interpretation of results. One type of policy states have set to increase the quality of data is to require that all instructors be trained in methods of assessment administration. Connecticut's CAPP initiative (and the subsequent Connecticut Competency System) is an example of how new adult basic education instructors are expected to receive training in the administration and use of the CASAS instruments as part of their orientation to a program. Through Pennsylvania's Project EQuAL, assessment training is being made available to local adult basic education staff. Since the beginning of the competency-based initiative in California, assessment training has been an integral part of the state's staff development program.

A key factor in promoting high-quality data is the training of local program staff in the multiple purposes and uses of data. Often program staff view learner assessment and program data as information that must be submitted to the state for accountability purposes. In fact, the primary client for these data is the learner, followed by the instructor and the program administrator. Assessment and related program intake data about a learner can provide the following types of information that instructors can use in guiding instruction:

- Goals for participating in a program
- Learning strategies and the role of literacy in learners' daily lives
- Attitudinal disposition toward learning
- Skills and knowledge at time of entry into a program
- Progress toward skill and goal attainment

Instructors can use data about learners' goals for participation and skills and knowledge at time of entry into a program to develop an individualized learning plan that is reasonable given the learners' goals, prior experience, and skills. Providing ongoing assessment information to learners can enable them to monitor their own progress and identify the skill areas in which they may wish to focus their study. This information also helps learners to identify their strengths and reinforces their participation in a program.

As the second beneficiary of data, instructors can use assessment information to target instruction so that learners receive adequate assistance in specific areas of need. Assessment results also provide a picture of the overall performance of a class and may signal that changes are needed in instructional methods or materials. Furthermore, this information can be helpful in indicating that learners have needs that are impeding their progress.

There are multiple ways in which an administrator can use data effectively in managing a program. An examination of assessment results by class and level can indicate the overall strengths and weaknesses of a program as well as needed changes in types and levels of instruction. This may in turn indicate that staff need training in particular content or instructional methods. Variable performance by individual learners (in contrast to the performance

of a whole class) can signal that learners may require services in addition to those offered by the adult education program.

At the program level, administrators can use assessment and demographic data to determine the populations of adult learners not being served and the extent to which a program meets the state's performance standards. This information also can be used in awarding learners certificates of progress or credentials. For example, states are developing learner certificate programs that will be used to document and recognize learners' progress from one level to the next in an ABE or English-as-a-second-language program. Part of this documentation may include the competencies that a learner is expected to demonstrate at each level of proficiency.

If viewed from the perspectives of the learner, instructor, and administrator, assessment and program data are valuable tools in guiding learning, facilitating the delivery of services, and managing a program. The more value that a program places on the data that it collects, the higher in quality the data are likely to be.

Funding Programs Based on Performance. A third emerging policy area concerning assessment is the funding of programs based on their performance. States are beginning to consider the relationship of implementing standards to funding. This is a complicated issue with many facets. For example, one consideration is the extent to which all programs, regardless of funding level, will be held to the same levels of performance. Related to this is the relationship of equity to performance funding. As states begin to develop practices related to performance funding, they will have to consider the types of allowances that might be made when unexpected events, such as an influx of the target population of learners in a community, impedes a program's capacity to meet its performance goals. One approach might be to consider a range of factors concerning performance (e.g., learner, attendance, percent of target population served) that would be used to assess whether a program has met its performance objectives.

The Role of Professional and Organizational Learning

A key element in any systemic change activity is the role of development of both professionals and the organizations in which these individuals work. The underlying assumption is that instructors involved in reform may not possess all of the necessary knowledge,

skills, and attitudes that are needed to carry out the reform, so they may need to engage in a long-term process of learning. A related view is that lifelong learning is a necessary component of all work, since the demands required for work are likely to change over time.

In the field of adult education, this change process is known as continuous improvement. Another assumption that often is not acknowledged is that individuals at other levels of the system who support instructors' work (e.g., administrators) have a similar learning challenge. Furthermore, organizations possess qualities that are greater than the aggregate of individuals within it, and there is learning that can be associated with the organization as a whole (Knapp 1997).

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The administrator is the interpreter of state policy and has a key role to play in providing leadership in change activities.

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Almost all of the states support professional development for local adult education staff to some degree (Mackin et al. 1996). The types and extent of these activities vary considerably, with short-term workshops and conference participation still a major part of the staff development system in adult education. Some states have centralized the delivery of professional development as a way of coordinating training opportunities, disseminating practices, and encouraging ongoing improvement activities.

More recently, attention is being paid to the administrators who lead the local adult education programs. Any systemic change activity must include these individuals in the policy discussion and in transferring information concerning new practices or requirements to instructional and other staff. Many states regularly convene their local program directors to discuss regulatory and reporting issues. Increasingly, these discussions have included information about the setting of standards, the collection of assessment data, and the availability of professional development opportunities for staff (e.g., program director meetings held in Oregon and Alaska). As the link between the state adult education and local program staff, the administrator is the interpreter of state policy and has a key role to play in providing leadership in change activities (Quigley 1997).

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The culture of an organization and its readiness to accept change are important factors in any program improvement process.

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The third level of learning occurs in an organization. The rules guiding an organization may need to be adapted to accommodate new practices and policies. As noted in the previous discussion on the adoption of innovation, the culture of an organization and its readiness to accept change are important factors in any program improvement process. Administrators and other leaders (e.g., program coordinators, resource teachers) in an adult education program have the responsibility of setting a vision, involving staff in

determining the steps that can be taken to implement the vision, and creating a community of learning so that each new practice or policy undertaken as part of a program's improvement process is reviewed and assessed. In this way, all participants have a stake in the outcomes and a voice in the way the outcomes are achieved.

Leveraging Support through Coordination and Collaboration

Within-State Activities

The final elements in systemic change are the activities that state adult education offices need to undertake in working with partners within education, across agencies serving the same subpopulations as their agencies, and with other states. Within a state, the adult education office can work with other offices in education serving adult learners as well as with other agencies (e.g., Labor, Human/Social Services, Corrections, Higher Education) and public/private organizations serving similar subpopulations in conducting the following activities:

- Developing/using joint data system with common performance outcomes
- Conducting/supporting joint data analysis
- Conducting joint staff development
- Conducting joint projects with state volunteer organizations

In order for these activities to occur, state adult education staff must establish a working relationship with staff from other agencies and understand the requirements that these agencies have and how adult education information can help these agencies address these needs. Furthermore, having a comparable management information system and policies for confidentiality of data are essential for any successful collaboration among agencies.

Across-State Activities

Another type of coordination is between or among state adult education offices. States in the same region or with similar delivery systems, populations of clients, or program improvement priorities

can develop joint products that address a common need, such as staff development, curriculum, or instructional resources. For this coordination to be successful, three conditions are necessary:

- An idea "champion" must be available to lead the process;
- There has to be a local commitment to pilot any processes or products that are developed; and
- Expertise must be available to refine and develop the final product.

For example, the states involved in the Northwest Regional Literacy Resource Center joined together in developing and pilot testing staff development modules and produced a Professional Development Series. They created processes for developing trainers and disseminating the training across the states. As a result of this coordination, the states can access a wider array of staff development modules than would have been possible without the joint effort.

A second form of coordination is for states to join together to share information, expertise, and existing resources in states, such as strategies for policy development, implementing performance standards, and collecting quality data. For these types of activities, state representatives must commit to meet or communicate, experiment with processes, and report back to the group.

State adult education staff also can transfer products, innovations, or effective practices between and among states, such as management information systems and staff development. In order for these activities to be successful, local technical support must be available, as well as resources for customizing the products and training and technical assistance for transferring the products and processes at a reasonable cost. All of these activities can help states leverage their limited resources and improve the quality of their adult education services.

A Final Word

As state adult education policymakers move forward in stimulating continuous program improvement, determining more effective ways of delivering services to adult learners, and collaborating with state agencies serving similar clients, they face a number of challenges. The experience of state adult education policymakers has shown that there are a number of strategies that can be taken to address these challenges:

- Develop statewide initiatives and pilot projects as strategies for focusing local programs' attention on the need for continuous program improvement and experimenting with new programs and practices.

- Encourage the adoption and adaptation of practices that have been shown to be effective as cost- and time-efficient ways of promoting program improvement.

- Invest in training and technical assistance with all levels of program staff.

- Set policies that are consistent and reinforce the statewide initiatives and pilot projects that are being used to promote program change.

- Consider intra- and interstate collaborations as ways of leveraging resources, creating high-quality products, and developing an infrastructure for serving clients more effectively.

With every new challenge comes an opportunity. The field of adult education is at a critical point in having to demonstrate the effects of the services it provides, its impact on program participants, and the ways in which its services support and relate to the country's work force investment system. A tension underlies these requirements, with many practitioners concerned about the possible new ways in which services are to be delivered to adults and their ability to continue to meet the needs of the learners as the learners define them. The mediation of this tension is a challenge for state and local adult education administrators, who must address the new federal requirements while maintaining a robust and responsive service delivery system. In times like these, building a

community of teaching and learning is essential, and engaging in systemic change is one strategy for coalescing support and creating a learning environment that enables individuals and organizations to grow personally and professionally. The discussion concerning approaches to systemic change presented in this document is offered as one way to think about what might be undertaken and accomplished with state and local leadership through a change initiative.

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